

## ARTISTS TO WATCH

# Maritime Mischiefs

**Duke Riley's** madcap aquatic projects include re-creating an 18th-century submarine, launching a floating tattoo parlor, and staging a mock Roman-style naval battle

BY ANN LANDI

FOR HIS LATEST PROJECT, *RECLAIMING THE LOST Kingdom of Laird*, Duke Riley kayaked to an island in the middle of the Delaware River, painted a giant mural atop a Citgo fuel-storage tank, and created a mock terrorist organization that petitioned Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela, for official recognition. Sponsored by the Philagrafika 2010 festival in Philadelphia, the ambitious venture shares with Riley's other endeavors a love of obscure episodes from the annals of American history, mixed with humor and derring-do. In researching the history of the 400-acre island, which is both the site of the Citgo tanks and a habitat for endangered birds, Riley discovered that an Irish immigrant named Ralston Laird moved there in 1851, became a successful farm manager for other immigrants, and was referred to in his obituaries as the "king." Riley then unearthed relics from the foundation of Laird's house and tracked down his descendants, initially intending to make commemorative plates in the style of Franklin Mint mementos. Instead, in the middle of the night, he painted the king's likeness on the 120-foot-diameter surface of a tank lid.

"What separates this from traditional archeology as an art project," says Riley in a gravelly voice tinged with the accent of his native Massachusetts, "is that I decided to deal with this guy like an actual king, so I'm putting together the family tree and giving everyone their proper royal title. Basically all the things I



Duke Riley in his *Acorn* submarine, in New York's East River in 2007, before the police impounded the vessel.

dig up from the ground are finds from the royal family." The letter to Chávez, whose government owns Citgo and is in the process of handing over the island to New Jersey, asked the president to publicly acknowledge the Laird Kingdom, erect a monument to the monarch, and offer programming for the hearing impaired (several of Laird's children were born deaf).

Among his other ventures, the 37-year-old artist has constructed a 30-foot-long boat frame out of bottles from a recycling center; built a shack called the Dead Horse Inn, which offers drinks and fresh crabs for a nickel one night a year; staged a Saint Patrick's Day parade in Havana, with a local drag queen as grand marshal; and re-created the *Turtle*, a submarine used in a battle during the Revolutionary War. This new vessel, named the *Acorn*, brought out the Coast Guard in the summer of 2007 when Riley ventured too close to the *Queen Mary 2*, which was docked in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Riley and two friends were taken into custody, and the event generated a slew of news stories on local TV stations.

The press turned out again last August for Riley's staging of a mock Roman-style naval battle in a reflecting pool outside the Queens Museum of Art, which sponsored the event. Four New York museums sponsored boats for the event, which was called *Those About to Die Salute You* and included toga-clad guests, fireworks, and vessels made from recycled materials, including reeds and Styrofoam. "We got more than we

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**ABOVE** Riley kayaked to an island in the Delaware River and, in the dead of night, climbed on a Citgo fuel-storage tank to paint the mural *King Ralston 1825-1911*, 2009. **LEFT** *Those About to Die Salute You*, a battle staged by Riley in a reflecting pool outside the Queens Museum of Art last summer. The museum is exhibiting memorabilia from the event—including photos, videos, a diorama, a battleship, and a print made from paper harvested in Flushing Meadows Corona Park—through the 13th of next month. **OPPOSITE** *Libertas aut Mori*, 2007, a mosaic featuring a fictitious rogue soldier in a real-life Revolutionary War aquatic battle.

bargained for, but it was an amazing experience,” says Tom Finkelpearl, executive director of the Queens Museum. “What makes Duke an interesting artist is that he has an ability to create a compelling psychological environment.”

What Finkelpearl terms Riley’s “do-it-yourself esthetic” involves meticulous planning and historical authenticity. He recalls an Italian who witnessed the event remarking on how similar it was to ancient Roman battles known as *naumachiae*. Even Riley’s performance-oriented projects are generally ac-

companied by drawings, maps, videos, invented artifacts such as scrimshaw etchings on plastic made to look like ivory, and other “documentation.” (Magnan Metz Gallery in New York sells his videos for \$10,000; mosaics for \$15,000 to \$60,000; drawings for \$5,000 to \$75,000; and vitrines of objects like scrimshaw for \$20,000 to \$25,000.)

Riley, who holds degrees from Rhode Island School of Design and Pratt Institute, has long been fascinated by maritime history. He grew up on the outskirts of Boston, spending time



COURTESY MAGNAN METZ GALLERY,  
NEW YORK

with an uncle who was a fishmonger. "I remember hanging around the docks and going to crappy dive bars along the water," he says, "and instead of scaring me, it made me realize there was another life out there." He's especially attracted to waterways, he explains, because "most cities are built based on their relationship to the water. That's where the crazy stuff goes on, and that's where you find a level of tolerance that can't exist in mainstream society."

The heavily tattooed artist—a project in himself—has even

broken into the Cleveland sewage system to document an underground river that was a hobo encampment during the Depression. In the course of that project, he discovered that Eliot Ness had been called upon to track down a serial killer preying on vagrants (the killer was never caught). And, with the support of a travel grant from Art Matters, he will be sailing next month to an island in the Grenadines, one of the few places where whaling is still legal, to set up a floating tattoo parlor. The tattoo equipment will run on solar energy. ■